

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Tuesday, October 18, 2005

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STARK TO HOLD TOWN MEETINGS - HELP WITH NEW MEDICARE DRUG PROGRAM ON AGENDA

WASHINGTON – U.S. Representative Pete Stark (D-CA, 13th) will hold two town meetings this Saturday, October 22nd, to direct residents of California's 13th district to independent groups that can answer questions about the new Medicare drug program. As always, Stark will also be available at these meetings to answer questions on other important issues.

"I'm holding these meetings to deliver the message that before making any decisions, Medicare beneficiaries should take their time, check their facts and know their options," Stark said. "Senior citizens and people with disabilities will be faced with a dizzying array of options and seem to have few places to turn to for unbiased information. These town meetings will give residents of the 13th district an opportunity to get straight answers to their Medicare questions."

The meetings will be held this Saturday, the 22nd, in Fremont from 9-10:30AM at the Fremont Senior Center (40086 Paseo Padre Parkway) and in San Leandro from 11:00AM – 12:30 PM at the San Leandro Library – Dave Karp Senior Facility (300 Estudillo Avenue).

In addition, Rep. Stark has invited representatives from California's Health Insurance Counseling and Advocacy Program (HICAP) to help those at the town meetings answer related questions. HICAP provides counselors trained to handle questions about the new Medicare drug program, and all of Medicare. A counselor will be on hand at each town meeting to answer questions, but residents can contact HICAP at any time at 1-800-434-0222.

Starting January 1, 2006, Medicare will offer prescription drug coverage through new private drug plans and through Medicare Advantage plans. Fifty-nine plans are available in the 13th district; 53 from stand-alone prescription drug plans and six through managed care plans. Enrollment for the new drug program begins November 15th, however private health plans began marketing their products on October 1st. The Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS) is currently mailing a handbook to Medicare beneficiaries titled "Medicare and You, 2006."

There are organizations to contact to receive unbiased information about which plan, if any, may be best. Medicare beneficiaries, their families and friends can call Medicare directly at

1-800-MEDICARE (633-4227).

Rep. Stark's efforts are not limited to informational actions. Earlier this month, Stark introduced the Medicare Informed Choice Act (HR 3861), aimed at easing the implementation of the new Medicare prescription drug program for more than 40 million Medicare beneficiaries. Specifically, the bill would delay late enrollment penalties, protect seniors who make an initial mistake in selecting a plan by allowing a one-time change in plan enrollment, and protect retirees who may not be aware that purchasing Medicare drug coverage could cost them their retiree health benefits.

"Seniors and people with disabilities will be extremely confused as they weigh their options with regard to private Medicare drug plans," Stark warned. "The Medicare Informed Choice Act can provide beneficiaries extra protections during the first year of this complex new program so that they won't feel pressured into making a bad choice."